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# THE STATE LIBRARY OF MASSACHUSETTS: A HISTORY

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COLLECTION

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INTERIOR VIEW OF THE MASSACHUSETTS STATE LIBRARY  
1855

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State Library of Massachusetts—1855

Bryant Addition—as it appeared when located on the  
present site of Nurses Hall, State House Boston, MA.

Reprinted from *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*, May 31, 1856

# THE STATE LIBRARY OF MASSACHUSETTS: A HISTORY

Gaspar Caso, State Librarian

Originally issued as State Library of Massachusetts, 1826-1986,  
for the 160th anniversary of the Library.  
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# STATE LIBRARY OF MASSACHUSETTS

The State Library has maintained a position of vital importance in the State House since its formal establishment in 1826. Starting from a collection of maps, statute books, and government documents, the Library has grown into a multifaceted resource for legislators, executive personnel, state employees, historians, genealogists, and interested citizens. Through the political turmoils of one hundred and sixty years in the State House, the State Library has continuously reflected the progressive ideals of the legislative and executive branches of government.

The nucleus of the library was formed from materials acquired through an exchange program begun in 1811. Realizing that information on current legislation and governmental activities in other states was not easily available, the Legislature voted to exchange maps, statute books, and other documents systematically with other states. By 1826, so much material had accumulated in the halls and chambers of the small Bulfinch State House that the Legislature decided to give the State Land Agent the additional responsibilities of Librarian, and use his office for a library. John W. Coffin, the only Land Agent to hold the position of State Librarian, served in that capacity for 23 years.

Additional exchange programs further widened the scope of Library collections. In 1844 the Legislature voted to exchange judicial decisions with the other states. Since that time the Reports of Decisions of the Supreme Court of Massachusetts have been exchanged on a regular basis with the participating states.

In 1845, an eccentric Frenchman named Nicolas Alexandre Vattemare proposed to the Legislature an international exchange program similar to the interstate exchange begun in 1811. Massachusetts, along with several other states and the United States Congress, agreed to hire Vattemare as an agent to make exchanges of state documents for similar books and "works of science and art" in Europe. Though chiefly known as a ventriloquist and impersonator, Vattemare had a deep interest in libraries. He played an important role in the founding of the Boston Public Library, and in 1985 the State Library placed on loan to the Boston Public Library's Rare Book Department all of its Vattemare collection.



State Library—circa 1890—Bryant Addition

Although the foreign exchange brought into the Library artistic and cultural works that some considered “not wholly appropriate to the Library” (Catalogue of the State Library, 1858, p. XV.), a precedent existed for the purchase of special items. In 1833, the Legislature had appropriated \$800 to purchase a copy of Audubon’s *Birds of America*, one of the Library’s greatest treasures. Many works acquired since the founding of the library were gathered into a Special Collections Department in the 1970s, representing a priceless artistic and historical collection. Perhaps the single most valuable item is William Bradford’s manuscript history of Plymouth Colony from its founding to 1649. The manuscript had been kept in the Thomas Prince Library at Old South Church, but apparently in the early days of the Revolution, colonial officials removed it for safekeeping. It was discovered in 1855 in the library of the Lord Bishop of London. Returned to the Commonwealth and placed under the custody of the State Library in 1897, the Bradford Manuscript, the earliest history of Massachusetts, is a cornerstone of the State Library’s historical documents.

Many forces shaped the growth and development of the Library, principally the needs of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, as well as physical space considerations. From the beginning, these forces influenced decisions as to what ought to be collected and what services ought to be provided.



By the 1840s, the library collection, which now included historical works and reference books as well as maps, state statutes and legislative documents, had outgrown the space available in the Land Agent's office. Renovation of a basement room beneath the Office provided more space, but not enough. Furthermore, moisture in the basement caused serious mold damage to the books. A long-term solution to the Library's crowded conditions was needed, and in 1851 the Legislature voted to build an addition to the north of the Bulfinch State House. When completed, the new quarters greatly expanded library shelf space. Most of the addition was fireproof, but the heavy masonry and iron structure created a new problem for the Library: excessive condensation threatened mold damage to the books. The Librarian found it necessary to keep the rooms uncomfortably hot in both the summer and the winter to reduce the moisture problem.

Designed largely to meet the expanding needs of the Library, the building of the addition signalled a change in library management as well. Formerly, management had been overseen by a joint standing committee appointed annually by the Legislature. Recognizing the "disadvantages incident to the want of a uniform administration," (Catalogue of the State Library, 1858, p. xvii.), the Legislature in 1850 provided for a Board of Trustees, composed of three members, each to serve a term of three years with reappointment allowed. Appointments were made by the Governor with the approval of the Council. From the beginning, the appointed trustees were men of accomplishment and high public esteem. Charles Sumner became one of the first three trustees in 1851, the year he began his career in the United States Senate as a leading opponent of slavery. Nathaniel Shurtleff, physician, historian, and Mayor of Boston (1868–1870), was appointed in 1856. Edward Everett Hale, well known Unitarian minister and author, served on the Board from 1881 to 1908. Many others of similar distinction served as trustees, bringing to the Library a sense of mission and high purpose.

Even more important than the establishment of a Board of Trustees was the decision to shift the responsibilities of State Librarian from the office of the Land Agent to the Secretary of the Board of Education. As the first Education Secretary to assume the additional role in 1849, Barnas Sears represented the influential philosophy of his Board of Education predecessor, Horace Mann. Sears, later to become president of Brown University, proved to be an effective administrator and promoter of the Mann philosophy.

Advocating state aid to public schools and the establishment of teachers' colleges (Normal Schools), Mann led a powerful reform movement that reshaped legislative priorities in Massachusetts and beyond.

When the State Library moved into its new quarters in 1856, it occupied a central position in the State House, with the offices of the Secretary of the Board of Education on one side and the legislative chambers in close proximity. Many legislative committee meetings were held in the Library. It had become an indispensable resource, as well as a symbol for the central role of knowledge in the formation of legislation.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the State Library continued to grow, and appropriations increased. More attention was paid to the collection of historical works, memoirs and biographies, in addition to the exchange of government publications. The collection grew from about 3,100 volumes in 1831, at the time of the printing of the Library's first book catalog, to about 42,000 volumes in 1880, when the fourth updated catalog was printed.

Soon faced again with serious overcrowding of state offices and problems with ventilation, the Legislature began planning further expansion of the State House in the 1860s. The extension of the building north of Mt. Vernon Street in 1895 brought the State Library to its present location, with its stained glass windows overlooking Boston's West End.



State Library—circa 1897—Brigham Addition

Modernization of Library services began during the tenure of Caleb Tillinghast, State Librarian from 1879 to 1909. Mr. Tillinghast began collecting historical materials relating to state government, including an extensive file of biographical information on state legislators, which

has been constantly updated ever since. In 1892, a “current events” index to Boston newspapers (also including papers from Springfield, Worcester, and New York) was begun. Now called the Zimmer Index, it provides unique access to names and events from 1892 to 1930. Through these and other services, the Library staff became professional information brokers.

After publishing its fourth book catalog in 1880, the Library developed a card catalog for new acquisitions. Designed more as a reference tool for the library staff than as a guide for library patrons, the original card catalog nevertheless provided better access to the Library’s legal and historical materials than could otherwise be obtained. In 1915, work began on a new public card catalog based on the Dewey Decimal system, but retaining special access to the unique collections of the Library.

Perhaps the most important change in services was the creation in 1911 of the Legislative Reference Service, which brought all of the cataloging and indexing work into line with the original directive to serve the needs of state government. A Legislative Reference Librarian was appointed, and several rooms on the West side of the Library, were renovated for the exclusive use of legislative researchers. Over the years, this reference service has expanded in scope and importance.



State Library—circa 1912—Brigham Addition



For more than a hundred years the State Library has been a depository for federal documents, though the collecting of selected government publications began much earlier. In 1984, the Legislature passed a law requiring state agencies to provide copies of official publications to the State Library, simplifying a collection practice that predates the official establishment of the Library.

In 1910, the Legislature added to the Board of Trustees, as ex officio members, the Senate President and House Speaker, thus acknowledging the strong ties between the Library and the Legislature. The first Senate President to serve on the Board was Allen T. Treadway, followed by many other distinguished men, including Calvin Coolidge. Among the successors of Joseph Walker, the first House Speaker on the Board, were Leverett Saltonstall, Christian Herter, and Thomas "Tip" O'Neill. In 1977, the Office of Secretary of State was added as an ex officio member. Paul H. Guzzi and Michael Joseph Connolly have been the first Secretaries of State to serve on the Board.



State Library of Massachusetts—1952—present location Room 341 State House

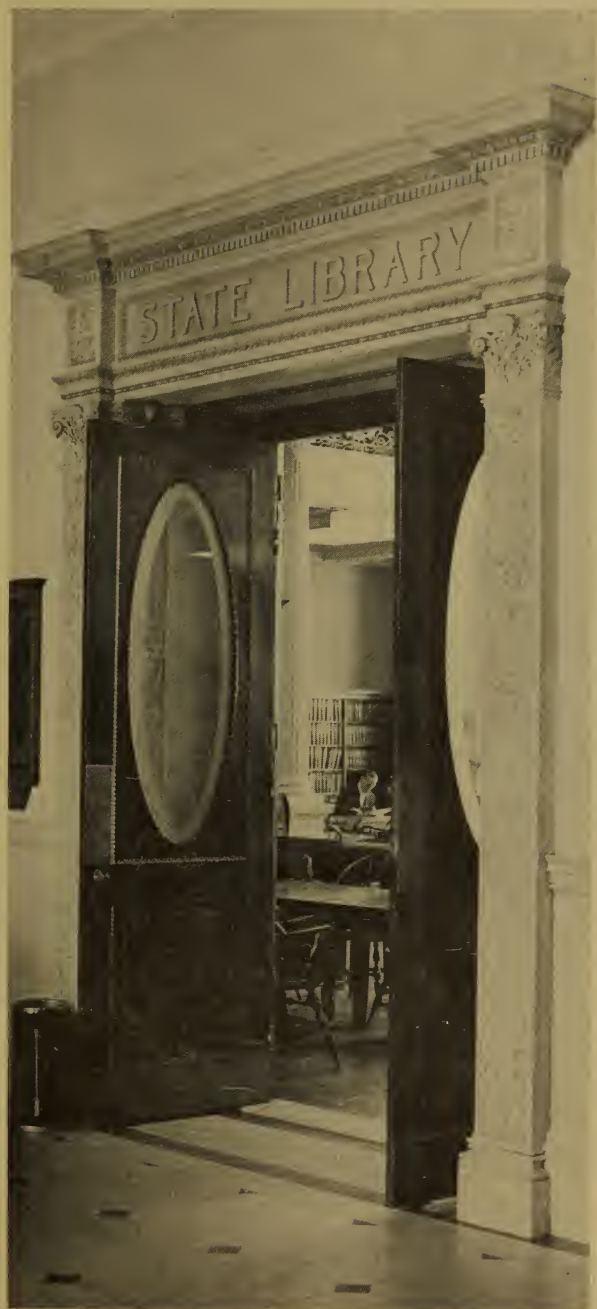
Since the era of modernization in the Library began some hundred years ago, it has continued to respond to the changing needs of its patrons. During the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, Library collections grew rapidly and the staff worked hard to maintain and improve services

without major changes in facilities or technology. A new era of modernization began in the 1970s with the arrival of computer technology. Many positive changes were initiated. A new card catalog, based on the Library of Congress system, greatly simplified cataloging procedures and improved patron access. Expansion of the periodicals holdings, accompanied by a greater use of microfilm, improved one of the most important Library services. Cataloging and interlibrary loan service were strengthened with the addition of an OCLC computer terminal in the late 1970s. More recently, the purchase of personal computers has given the staff access to computerized databases such as DIALOG, LEXIS, NEXIS, and LEGISNET, to provide increased service to state personnel.

The new era of modernization is an ongoing effort by the staff of the State Library to improve services to Library patrons and to stay up-to-date with developments in library science. Service to state government and to the citizens of Massachusetts, the primary goal of the State Library for 160 years, will continue to guide the staff for the next 160 years.



State Library of Massachusetts—1984—view of main reading room and reference area from library balcony



Doors—Main entrance—Room 341—State Library

